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Kiss to the Fist

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Kiss to the Fist

Peter had never been this close to a freight before. He had little need to leave his small Virginian town and could only ever catch glimpses of those black rails from up on the hills. They'd looked like a row of ants then, set single file through the valleys. Up close it was a gear-toothed monster, chuffing up steam and screeching something awful as the axle began to spin. He'd never thought he'd see a train up close, let alone that he'd be trying to hop one.

Well, he thought, fist digging into wet grass as he lifted into a runner's crouch. *Times change. Rosie would blow her wig over this.*

The train inched forward on the tracks, groaning at the push of its own weight. Peter stole a quick look behind him, at the boorish freight guard down at the caboose who had his back to him. His hand was on the gun at his belt, and he held his broad shoulders high like some stalking wolf.

Peter threw his entire body from the ground, long legs flying through the bushes as he raced for the open car. The weight of his satchel on his back was a hassle he'd underestimated, and the corner of his journal whacked into the small of his back with every stride. He ran neck and neck with the door, hands latching onto the side just as a shout started behind him, muffled by the tracks.

Peter jumped with all his might onto the accelerating train, overcompensating for the weight on his back and tumbling far into the dark car.

He rested on the floor for a beat, gulping down quick breaths. The floor rumbled below him, and while dark and musty, the car was far from quiet—it shuttered and rattled with every shifting cog. Scattered through the car were large wooden crates, held to the floor by their weight. Each had peeling blocky letters. *FORD AUTO PARTS*, Peter read as he traced the dust off one with his finger.

His knees tightened in protest as he picked himself up, brushing dirt from his pants and shifting his pack off his shoulder; it landed clunkily on the wood. He rolled his shoulders, hand pressed to the space where his journal had decided it wanted to bruise his spine and turned toward the open door.

Outside the world moved in dizzying arrays of green and blue, smudged like his old family photos—where he moved too soon and smeared himself across the page. Still, he could make out that little town on the hill, its image cut by the trees lining the tracks. The church spire stood out along the hill, the only building tall enough to be seen from the valley.

The train lurched under him with a horrible clanking noise. Peter lowered himself back to the floor.

He'd never gone very far from Middleburg. He'd only ever reached about two towns over, when his father had taken him in search of a mechanic. That town was much bigger than his—not a city, not even close, but it had streets lined with automobiles and throngs of people in the marketplaces. That was the most people he'd ever seen in one place, and he'd been enamored.

There was a sweltering heat building under his ribcage, and Peter clawed at his collar. Wytheville wasn't a city, and he'd still felt lost there. He had no idea how big New York actually was. A hundred times that size, probably. A steel jungle. Peter had never been somewhere where he couldn't see trees.

He suddenly wasn't quite sure what he was doing on this train.

But he knew it was better than staying in that forsaken town.

Still, leaving Middleburg felt like cutting off a rotten limb. A necessary amputation, surely, but one that left him with phantom pain all the same. He wondered what his parents would tell Rosie of his absence, or what her classmates had already told her about his situation. Peter hoped she didn't hate him if she knew, and if she didn't, well, he hoped she didn't hate him for leaving. Mostly, he just hoped she'd never step another foot near that church.

He settled himself against one of the dusty crates, grabbing the lip of his satchel and rummaging through its contents. Fruit, water, the wad of bills he had stolen from his father, and at the bottom, his old leather-bound journal. The freight would stop through another town at some point, someplace where he could mail this letter. Rosie deserved a final goodbye from him, and some semblance of an explanation.

Peter flipped through the pages, finding an empty one in the middle. Whatever letter she got from him his parents would surely read, if they didn't throw it out first. He would just have to be vague if it had any chance of reaching his sister. He tapped his pencil on the page in thought, once, twice, thrice, before starting:

Dear Rosie,

I'm on a train car right now. I hopped right in it and nearly got gunned down. I wish I could tell you all about it in person but you probably shouldn't be seen

with me I wouldn't want you to get any stupid ideas of your own. You probably don't get why your big brother just up and left and why everyone's so mad. Or maybe everyone's told you already and you want me gone too. I want you to know that I don't regret a single thing. That town may not forgive me but God will and I know he would never have let me into heaven if I ignored what I'd seen. And I hope that awful place goes to Hell for all their silence—I hope you're safe and okay and don't trust strangers okay? But also don't trust the people you're forced to be near—Stay in school and do good and help Dad with his work.

Miss you and Mom and Dad.

Love, From, Sincerely,

Peter

Peter dug the graphite of his pencil deep into the paper. The last swoop of the r dark and stilted. He wouldn't be able to send this—this scrawling, scribbled mess of rage. He dug the tip of his pencil on the paper, over and over, under the page tore from his journal and crumbled on his lap. A useless letter from a useless kid. His eyes burned, and he shoved the meat of his thumb into his mouth to stifle whatever anguished whimper eked through.

The paper wilted pathetically on his thigh. He crumbled it into a ball and tossed it out the train. The wind took it in seconds.

Hours passed in a tumbleweed of cycling emotions, rocking to and fro with the beat of the train. An open field would appear outside the box door, and Peter would feel elated at the freedom, stretching his arms as he watched pastures tumble by with ease. Then, a distant town would pass, and the confidence would blow out of him like that torn-up journal page. By the time the train began losing speed, Peter's eyes were swollen, and his hand was red and sweltering from his teeth.

The train came to a complete stop, its brakes shrieking under the loud chuff of steam. Underneath the noise, Peter could hear the booming shouts of rail workers and guards alike as they bustled around the docking train. From the open door he could see the busy downtown area, its citizens moving around like mice.

Peter glanced toward his journal. This town would surely have a post office, but he had yet to begin another letter. He moved to grab the cracked leather book when a shrill whistle pierced his ears.

“All right!” a booming voice shouted. “Make your rounds, boys.”

Panic needled Peter's skin, and his arm erupted in goosebumps. He shook his hands, frantically looking around the cart for a place to hide. If he was caught, it could mean a beating. Worse, though, it could mean being sent back to Middleburg.

He dropped to all fours, crawling through the narrow gaps between the thick boxes until he sat with his shin pressed against the wall of the boxcar, and his back flush against the shipping crate. The train had settled its grumbling, and the fitted space swallowed the outside bustle of the rail workers until he could hear only the roaring of blood in his ears and his rasping breath. He shoved his hand into his mouth again. *Quiet, quiet*, an older, gruffer voice whispered in his head. Peter squeezed his eyes shut.

“Clear,” a voice sounded, just outside his cart. Peter did not move until he felt the train lurch forward again. He wrenched himself away from the narrow space, heaving in a breath and rubbing at his eyes as he sat at the far end of the boxcar, hidden in the shadows.

That’s when the yelling started.

From the bushes, behind trees, people of all colors and ages made that same mad dash to the tracks as Peter did. They scurried like rats, tossing their packs and bodying the guards in their haste. Shots went off, the loud *pat-pat-pat* jolting Peter into grabbing his satchel and pressing it against his chest like a shield.

The train was gaining speed now. He heard screams over the creaking of the tracks. Just as he thought they started moving too fast for someone to hop in his car, a knapsack soared into the train car, sliding over the wood until it hit Peter’s boot.

A hand followed it, gripping the metal frame tightly. He could tell that the man was struggling to pull himself in, eyes clenched shut against the wind as he threw himself forward, rolling on the floor until he settled on his back and panted into the air.

Peter was frozen, still clutching his satchel to his chest like a lifeline. The man was filthy, his green jacket covered in mud and his face unshaven and patchy. There was a hole in the fabric over his armpit and sweat stains on his collar.

Eventually, the man rose, groaning as he stretched upwards. “God *damn*,” he muttered to himself, before turning his head to look for his forgotten knapsack.

The knapsack that lay on Peter’s foot.

“Hey, kid,” the man started, gesturing with a *come-hither* motion. “Pass me that thing, would ’ya?”

Peter kicked the knapsack across the floor, never taking his eyes off the stranger. It slid about halfway before flopping pathetically a few feet away.

The man groaned, hauling himself off the floor with great effort. “Could’ve just handed it to me, I won’t bite.”

I will, Peter thought. *I’ll bite you and claw at your eyes and toss you onto those tracks*. The idea came to his mind so quickly that it nearly scared him.

The man pulled water from his back and guzzled it for several seconds, much of the water spilling down his chin. "I'm surprised a kid like you managed to freight-hop this thing. Those damn Bulls are *vicious*. They don't hesitate a single second before shooting you down." He rubbed a hand through uncut blond hair. "Forces everyone to hop a moving train. Dangerous business, the guy just next to me fell. Crushed his damn head like a watermelon." He slapped his hand together, turning to look Peter in the eye. "*Bam*, just like that."

Peter supposed the Bulls were the rail guards. He shrunk back. He knew train-hopping was dangerous. Between the guards and the train itself, it was a recipe for disaster. But he hadn't realized just how lucky he'd been, living in such a secluded area. The security had been much lower.

Looks like he'd just have to wait until he reached the city to mail that letter. At least he had more time to write it.

The man whipped his pack behind his back before he laid down on it like a pillow. "Anyhow, looks like we'll be stuck with each other for a while. Name's Herby, what about you, kid?"

Peter hesitated. Herby hadn't approached him. He looked like he wasn't going to at all. A name couldn't hurt. It didn't mean anything. "Peter."

"Nice name," Herby said, and raised his hand to his mouth, making a fist and kissing it. "You taking this train to the city, Pete?"

Peter blinked, baffled at the motion. He hummed an affirmation distractedly.

"Course you are. Everyone's going to the city. Including me, that's where all the jobs are." Herby stretched his hands above his head as if reaching for the sun. The bones of his elbows popped. "Shouldn't've left. That's my home turf, good ol' New York City. Truly a delight she is. Yessir. Went out west to get gold, and struck dirt. Hitching a ride back to my Ma now that the economy is shot." He kissed his fist again, with a grin.

"What about you, Petey? You're a little baby-faced to be freight-hopping. You a runaway?"

Shock rippled through Peter, and he tightened his arms around himself. The truth must've shown in his eyes because Herby went on.

"What'cha running from?"

His parents, he thought. Their cold denial. His teacher's whispers. White robes and wooden pews and a golden cross. God, maybe.

"Doesn't matter anymore," he said instead, adjusting himself so he wasn't so hunched up. Too vulnerable looking. He held his chin up. "I'm gonna be a city kid. That's all that matters now." *I'm gonna be away from that town. And that's what really matters.*

Herby barked a laugh. "Drink to that!" He kissed his fist. "Maybe we'll end up with the same shitty factory job. Wouldn't that be great?"

Peter didn't know about that. But having someone who knew the city close by might be helpful. Herby still hadn't moved toward him, that was a good sign.

They lapsed into silence, Herby had closed his eyes and fallen into a slumber, his mouth hanging open. Peter stretched out the cramp in his legs. They were passing by a river; he watched its meandering path as the hours passed.

The sky was yellowing when Herby woke up again. He yawned the same way a bear would, with one drawn out bellow, and tilted his head toward the sun. "Look at that beautiful view!" he cheered, bringing his lips to his fist.

Peter furrowed his brow. "Why do you do that?"

"Do what, Petey?"

"That thing with your hand. You keep kissing it."

"That!" Herby exclaimed, holding up his hand and pointing to it. "Is me showing love to myself, and the lovely world beyond us. You always gotta show some love to yourself in these trying times, kid. Else you'll go crazy."

Peter looked down at his right hand, the skin was mottled with short, dimpled scabs that had never quite scarred over. He flexed his thumb. It spasmed.

"Sun's settin', which means we'll be reaching the city soon. We'll get in after dark. Blessin' and a curse, the night's dangerous, but it'll cover us from the Bulls and make runnin' easier."

Peter nodded, his eyes vacant. He didn't know what he'd do when they got to the city. He had enough money for a room, maybe. But what if they got in so late everything was closed? He mouthed over his thumb with his lips. Would he have to ask Herby for help? Would that be safe?

Herby was laying down again, hands waving in the air. He was muttering something under his breath over and over.

"Pete. Peter. Petey, Pete. Saint Pete," he was saying to the ceiling.

"What?" Peter asked.

"Nothin'. Just sayin' your name," he replied. "Say, your parents Christian? Name you after Saint Peter?"

Peter's shoulders shot to his jaw, and he crawled back into his collar like an under-zealous turtle. His parents *had* named him after Saint Peter, and Rosie after Saint Rose. He'd always been proud of this as a kid before he actually learned about who he was in school. Saint Peter was the first Pope, sure, but he was also the one to deny Jesus thrice. Peter had always tried to make up for that when he was younger, always praying, going to confession, and agreeing to extra lessons with Father Dominic.

Fat load of good it did him.

His eyes stung with unshed tears. Herby hadn't noticed, barreling over his silence with ease.

"Good name to have, Saint Peter." He nodded to himself and raised his hand again, poised to kiss.

"No, it's fucking *not*."

Herby froze with his hand still in the air. Startled, he turned his head toward Peter. Peter's head felt hot; it felt like there was so much dust in the room he couldn't breathe. Embarrassed by his own outburst, he shoved his thumb into his mouth. Bit down until he tasted iron.

Stupid, stupid. Be quiet. Don't fucking say anything. Don't tell anyone. It doesn't do anyone any good.

"Woah, Pete," Herby began, at a loss. "It's okay, you're okay. Take a deep breath for a second."

Peter shook his head, gasping around the skin in his mouth. Fuck those after-school lessons. Rosie had wanted to follow his example and wanted to start them the following year. Peter choked on a sob and bit down harder. He couldn't believe he *left* her there.

Herby sat up but didn't approach him. That was good. Peter didn't know what he would do if Herby came near him.

"You can't be doing that to yourself, Pete. You gotta let go of your hand, there. C'mon now, you're gonna destroy it, then how are you gonna get a job?" He laughed, a trembling thing. "Huh, kid? No one's gonna hire a guy with a screwed up joint."

The gentle threat brought some clarity to Peter's brain. He unclenched his jaw, his hand a bloodied, red mess. He wiped it on his pants, grimacing at the pain.

They both sat in silence for several beats, the air tense.

Finally, Herby asked, "Do you, uh, wanna talk about that?"

Peter was barely paying attention. He wiggled his thumb, uncaring about the throb. All he could think of was Rosie. Rosie, who was four years younger than him. Rosie, who always followed in his example, even when it pissed him off. Rosie, who he'd left there.

Peter ripped open his satchel, grabbing his pencil and the journal. He flipped past the torn-out page.

Rosie, he started, with sure strokes.

I'm in the city. When I get enough money, I'll send for you. I'm sorry this is confusing. That place isn't safe for you. You have to trust in your big brother. I'll send you my home address when I find a place.

Love you,

Peter

He tore out the page, folding it neatly and shoving it into his pocket. The sun had finally set, the full moon illuminating the boxcar and surrounding

Herby in a gentle silhouette. He could see the city lights now, twinkling like the stars he couldn't see anymore.

He shoved his journal back into his bag and tied it closed, throwing it on his back. They'd be stopping soon.

Herby watched him in silent confusion, tracing him with his eyes as Peter approached closer to the open door and sat a few feet away from him. The train rocked on the tracks.

"You can't be doing that, kid. Be kind to yourself," Herby said, motioning to Peter's mauled thumb. "Kiss the fist, remember? You'll go crazy otherwise, or lose a finger."

Peter just nodded. "I'll try." He really didn't want to lose a finger, not when he'd just arrived.

The train hadn't even pulled to a full stop when Herby shot to his feet.

"Gotta jump and make a break for it now, kid. You ready?"

Peter stood up, adjusting his pack, and nodded.

"All right, ready? *Now!*"

They both leaped off the train, and Peter hit the ground running, following Herby blindly away from the tracks. The warehouses were still a mile or two off from the actual city, a steel beacon against the night.

When they reached a safe distance, they slowed to a walk. Trekking in silence. Peter couldn't help but crane his neck, the buildings were tall—taller than any tree he'd ever seen. They were so cramped, too. He glanced up at Herby, and found himself not wanting the older man to leave him alone in this.

He reached into his pocket, pulling out the letter.

"What's that, Pete?" Herby asked, panting slightly as they walked. "If you don't mind me asking."

Peter didn't mind, surprisingly. "A letter. To my little sister," he said, then hesitated. Herby might leave, if he told him. He supposed that would be the test. If Herby leaves, he'll just have to survive on his own. He could do that. He would have to.

"I'm gonna get her, when I get a job and a place. I can't let her stay back home. There was a priest—," Peter paused, choking on his spit, angry at the tears in his eyes. He pressed his hand into his side. "A priest. He wasn't—he isn't a good person. He was touch—touching kids. Me. Touching me. Can't let that happen to her. Won't."

The silence stretched. He chanced a look at Herby. Herby was wide-eyed, staring straight ahead.

"Fuck. Jesus Christ, kid. I'm fucking sorry."

Something about that, that acceptance made something bitter and vile flood out of him. Relief. He blinked tears away again, brushed them away with his arm. "Thank you," he muttered.

Herby nodded, and swallowed. "My Ma's place is too far to walk to tonight. There'll be a mailbox on the way for you to drop your letter in. We can find a cheap hotel for the night. You okay with that?"

"Yeah," Peter grunted. "I got some money."

"Good. And, hey, Pete. We can go job-hunting together, yeah? Help each other out. Sound good?"

Peter smiled, the first time in a while. "Sounds good."

Herby grinned. "Sweet," he said. He kissed his fist and gestured widely to the buildings in front of him. "Sweet, sweet New York City!"

Peter laughed. He brought his right hand to his lips, mottled and swollen. He kissed it, following the gesture to the city ahead of him. "Sweet New York City," he echoed.